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ABSTRACT

This guide outlines the process for writing a research proposal for classroom research on second language teaching, and suggests that this process is an important step in the process of planning and implementing the study itself. The format of such a proposal is first outlined, and each element (title, introduction, methodology, analysis, statement of significance) and sub-element (context, literature review, research questions/hypotheses, subjects, research design, data collection, data organization, statistical procedures) is defined and discussed, offering practical suggestions for conceptualization and organization. A sample research proposal for a study of teachers' question-asking behavior is appended. Contains four references. (MSE)

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*Chapter 3*

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# First Things First: Writing The Research Proposal

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A common way to do research is to plunge straight in, collect a vast amount of data, and then: disaster! You quickly panic as you struggle to find a way to process all the collected information.

It is far better to approach research in a systematic way. No builder would start construction without having first drawn up a set of architectural plans. In the same way, a research proposal is a modest document of one to four pages which shows concisely what the research topic is and how you are going to carry out the research. Having a properly written research proposal helps ensure that all parts of the research project have been carefully thought about before the research begins. Without careful consideration beforehand, you run the risk of coming up against serious problems that can result in a lot of time wasting and frustration.

Sometimes a research proposal is compulsory. That is the case if you are doing research in the hope of getting an academic qualification such as a Masters or Doctoral degree. Research is often funded by foundations or government agencies. Such bodies will require a research proposal before approving the research or granting any funds. But even when it is not mandatory, it still makes sense to do a research proposal as part of the process of planning a

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research project. Not only will this alert you to potential problems, but you will then have a handy document which you can use when you consult other, more experienced people for advice on how to solve those problems. With your proposal to work from, your more experienced colleagues are able to give you better advice on frequently encountered difficulties such as analyzing statistics by computer, and choosing suitable subjects.

For several reasons then, writing a research proposal can be an important and useful step in the process of planning and implementing a research study. But, what exactly is a research proposal and how does one go about writing one? What follows is an outline to help in the writing of a proposal. Each step is explained and an example taken from the proposal written by one of the authors (see Appendix). The completed research study was briefly discussed in Ellis (1994).

The form that this research proposal outline takes is similar to that of the final document written after the data has been collected and analyzed. This will help save time and make the job of writing the final report easier.

Title

A. Introduction
   1. Context—description of topic or problem
   2. Review of literature
   3. Research questions or hypotheses, or both

B. Methodology
   1. Subjects
   2. Design
   3. Data collection

C. Analysis
   1. Data organization
   2. Statistical procedures

D. Significance of Study

*Title*

The first thing you need is a working title for your research. Research titles have run the gamut from lengthy, arcane stuffy titles to instant attention-getting quirky titles such as "Say it Again Sam" or "The Chicago Which Hunt." Our advice is to steer a middle way. Have a title which gives the reader a clear idea of the topic but which is also brief. One way to do this is to use a short statement followed by a colon. After the colon can be a lengthier delineation of the topic. This is the approach taken by White (1992) in deciding on the title, "Teachers' Questions: Form, Function and Interaction—A Study of Two Teachers."

*Introduction*

The research proposal begins with an introduction. Usually this is not labeled specifically "Introduction." This convention is also followed by journal articles. Check accounts of research in such journals as *TESOL Quarterly* and *JALT Journal*. As indicated in the above outline, the introduction has three parts. The first part gives the reader an idea of the focus of the research. The second part attempts to link the research issue with existing information. Having reviewed the existing literature—the current body of information relevant to your topic—you need to establish why your research is important and timely. One way is to show that there is a lack of information relating to your topic or alternatively, that you can add a significant and different perspective. Having established a need for your research, you can then state your research questions or research hypotheses, or both.

Nunan (1992) stated that the minimum requirements for an activity to be considered research are: (a) a question; (b) data; and (c) analysis and interpretation. You cannot begin to plan or carry out research until you have a research question. The first step is to find a topic or area that interests you. This can come from your experience as a classroom teacher or language learner or from your own reading. Reading widely in academic journals can give you ideas for research. If you are interested in second language acquisition it is a good idea to read accounts of how children learn their mother tongue, or journals in fields other than language learning. For one piece of research we read journals dealing with social psychology and found ideas for a study dealing with the different factors that cause people to adjust their speech for different partners. If you are really in pursuit of ideas for research then the conclusions of doctoral theses are good hunting grounds because it is customary in the closing of a thesis to mention questions that the current study did not answer and to give recommendations for further study.

Having found an area that interests you, you will need to form a research question. Good research questions meet two criteria: (a) the question merits answering and is worth seeking an answer for, and (b) the question can, in fact, be answered.

In the research on teachers' questions, we started our proposal with the following statement to define what the research was about: "The kinds of questions teachers ask in classrooms has increasingly attracted the attention of researchers in recent years." We then did a brief survey of the existing research dealing with teachers' questions.

*The Literature Review*

The literature review has several functions: (a) it gives the background to your proposed research, (b) it shows that you are competent in that you have an understanding of what is currently known, and (c) it provides a reason for your research.

The review section usually ends with the author discussing the implications arising from the existing literature. Here is the place to point out gaps in existing knowledge on the subject, or the need to look at the issues from a fresh perspective. In this way, you provide justification for your proposed study, and demonstrate its importance.

In our proposal, the review of the literature pointed out that recent research on teachers' questions had moved towards experimental and quantitative research with reports containing a lot of statistical analysis but fewer examples of actual classroom discourse when compared to previous research in L1 settings. We mentioned that the study proposed "to fill this gap by not only analyzing the frequency of questions according to form and function but also. . . includ[ing] the additional dimension of discourse analysis."

*Questions or Hypotheses*

This section states your carefully thought up and worded hypothesis. In our research on teachers' questions we asked three questions:

1. What type of questions do teachers ask?
2. Which types of questions result in the longest student response?
3. Will there be any difference in the types of questions and responses according to the proficiency level of the class?

In addition to research questions, we also stated the object of our research in the form of a hypothesis. If your purpose is to acquire information—for example, the order in which second language learners learn morphemes—then the research area you will tackle is put as a research question. If, however, you are testing a theory, then you should state the object of your research as a hypothesis. The difference is that the answer to a hypothesis is a simple yes or no. The theory was either proved or it was not. With a research question, however, you can have a much wider range of answers. In our paper we included three hypotheses:

1. Teachers will ask more display questions than referential questions.
2. Learner responses to referential questions will be longer than the response to display questions.
3. A greater number of referential questions will be accompanied by a greater number of confirmation checks and clarification requests by the teacher.

*Method*

In this section of the proposal you include a description of how the research will be carried out and the method you will adopt to answer your research questions or hypotheses. You include who the subjects will be, the kind of research it is and how you will collect the data.

One test of a good methodology section is if after reading it somebody could proceed and carry out the research based solely on the information you have given. A straightforward way to tackle this section is to have three subcategories: (a) subjects, (b) design, and (c) data collection.

In our proposal on questions, we started this section by explaining that "the subjects for this study will be 43 adult students attending the in-company language training program of a major multi-national company." Next we profiled the teachers who would be the focus of the study. At this point we also explained the basis for choosing these two teachers. "The two teachers were selected on the basis of similar sex, nationality, and teaching experience. They also had access to classes at comparative levels and could teach the same lesson material to their classes."

*Design*

This section is the place to describe the type of research you are going to carry out. In our report we handled it this way: "This is intended to be descriptive research and will use naturally existing classes for the purpose of data collection. It will be a one-shot design in that each class will be observed only once."

*Data Collection*

In this section should include a detailed and accurate account of how you will go about collecting the data you need. In addition, this section should mention what equipment or materials will be used. Questionnaires are often listed here if the research in question is of a survey nature. The information in this section should be so clear that the reader can not only visualize the process of how your are going to do your research but would also have sufficient information to replicate your research. It should also be clear to the reader that the steps you have outlined are sufficient to answer the research questions mentioned. In our research proposal we mentioned that we would take four audio recordings of one hour each, and we listed the teachers and the classes that would be recorded. We also mentioned the newspaper article and the material that was to be used in the classes.

*Analysis*

This part of the proposal has typically two parts: (a) data organization, and (b) statistical procedures. This section focuses on the question of what you are going to do with all the data when you have collected it. It can be frightening to collect thousands of pieces of data and not know what to do with the information. Thinking in advance and putting something down in writing before you start can save a lot of frustration and wasted effort. For our paper on teachers' questions we tracked down, in the literature, various schemes for categorizing questions. The resulting classification scheme, a taxonomy, was largely what we had read in books and journals but was also modified to better suit the aims of the research. If you are going to use charts and tables you can also mention them at this point.

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*Statistical Procedures*

This part can be the most daunting of the whole research project. Luckily, if you need it, you can get help to steer you through the maze of deciding whether you need to use ANOVA, Pearson Correlation, or Chi-square. We found what statistics would help analyze our data to prove or disprove our hypotheses and were able to write, "Statistical frequencies obtained will involve 2-way Chi-square." Not all data will need a computer to process the numbers. For our paper on teachers' questions we did a lot of counting by hand. That involved adding up the number of times a student or teacher took a turn in speaking, and calculating the mean number of words in each student response.

*Significance*

This section is the place for you to state the importance of your research study. In it you explain the contribution it will make to linguistic science or whatever field you have chosen to write about. In the proposal on teachers' questions, we set about the task in this way.

> To the best of our knowledge no study has been made using Well's Discourse Role and Commodity Network for an analysis of the exchange structure of classroom discourse in an adult EFL setting. The effect of different proficiency levels has also not yet been researched. The proposed study outlined above is intended to contribute to a greater understanding of the role of teachers' questions and to provide more illustrative samples of actual classroom discourse.

It is said that there is nothing so practical as a good theory. The research you are proposing to carry out may have the potential to change peoples' lives—or at least how they teach and learn languages. If the results of your research have this potential here is the place to make the announcement.

## Reviewing the Proposal—Potential Problems

When you have written your research proposal, you should review it, possibly with the help of a colleague. One of the authors, who teaches research writing classes at a Japanese university, has found that the biggest problems that novice researchers have is defining the research question. As Nunan (1995, personal communication) has pointed out, this can also be a problem for experienced researchers. The problem is that often would-be researchers are unclear about knowing what they actually want to study. It is crucial that a beginning researcher has a clear understanding of what they want to research. If you have carefully thought out what you want to study and defined this in a suitable research question then the research has the greatest chance of going very smoothly. Read over your research proposal and make sure that it is clear what your study actually proposes to do. Make sure too, that the topic is worth investigating. Next check that the topic is sufficiently focused. Another major

problem with many initial proposals is that the scope of the research is too broad. This leads to problems of data collection and analysis and if it is too broad then it may be impossible for the research to lead to any conclusive findings. Our advice would be to keep the focus of enquiry relatively simple.

When reviewing the proposal also examine carefully the choice of subjects and the procedures that will be used. Make sure that you have carefully considered the relevant variables. For example, if you are comparing two groups and one group performs better using your material, can you safely say it was solely due to the effectiveness of the materials? Perhaps the group that did better was a higher level group or those students usually perform better since their teacher is more enthusiastic and they are therefore more motivated to learn English. Also make sure you can justify your use of subjects. It is not enough to reply that it is just convenient to use this set of students or that it is easier to get permission from a certain teacher.

Another problem frequently encountered is the difficulty of finding relevant background material. The following journals are a good source of articles that cover teaching, learning, and applied linguistics. ***Applied Linguistics, ELT Journal, English Teaching Forum, JALT Journal, Language Learning, Studies in Second Language Learning, System, TESOL Quarterly.***

Researchers interested in using the computer to do research can access ERIC (Educational Resources Information Center). ERIC is an abstract service that lists important journal articles and conference papers according to various categories.

## Conclusion

Writing a research proposal is a preparatory stage in the cycle of doing a research study. Seliger and Shohamy (1989) stated that there are four phases to the preparatory stage of any research study.

Phase 1. Formulating the general question. Possible sources are the experience and interests of the teacher/researcher, other research on second language acquisition or sources outside second language acquisition.

Phase 2. Focusing the question. Is the question both feasible and important?

Phase 3. Deciding on an objective. Description of research procedures and formulating research questions.

Phase 4. Formulating the research plan.

The research proposal is really a plan, a step-by-step guide to doing research. It will help ensure that you have given sufficient thought to all the crucial areas of research, such as, the basic research design, data collection and analysis of the results. It will also help you to see and avoid many potential problems. In addition to helping give shape to the planning process, it also makes the final

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writing up of the research easier as you already have the main headings for each part of the final research report. Once you have that done, you are ready for publication. In Japan two widely read journals that publish research are the *JALT Journal* and *The Language Teacher*. More and more teachers are carrying out their own research, particularly classroom-centered research. By following a step-by-step plan such as that outlined above even those not trained in research or statistical procedures could start a research project and make a valuable contribution.

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## Appendix: A Research Proposal

### Title

Teachers' Questions: Form, Function and Interaction—A Study of Two Teachers

### Introduction

The kinds of questions teachers ask in classrooms has increasingly attracted the attention of researchers in recent years. Studies of teachers' questions (Long and Sato, 1983; Brock, 1986; Long & Crookes, 1986) have analyzed the frequency of question types according to function, and in particular have sought to discover whether teachers ask more display questions than referential questions. The results indicate that in ESL classrooms teachers ask too many questions (White & Lightbown, 1984) and that these questions are typically display questions (Long & Sato, 1983). Studies in teachers' questions have also concentrated on identifying the effects of the use of comprehension checks, confirmation checks, and clarification requests. Such modifications to the interactional structure of conversation, it is claimed, facilitate second language acquisition. Earlier studies of teachers' questions featured school classrooms in an L1 setting. Studies such as Barnes, (1969) and Mehan, (1978) are informative and illustrated with extracts of classroom discourse. Later research, however, focusing on the ESL classroom has moved in the direction of quantitative research and contains almost no examples of recorded classroom discourse. In addition, studies such as Long and Sato (1983) and Brock (1986) have been experimental in design and have grouped students especially for the experiment or given advice to the teachers on how to teach the lesson.

The proposed study intends to fill this gap by not only analyzing the frequency of questions according to form and function, but also by including the additional dimension of discourse analyses.

The following research questions will be addressed:

1. What types of questions do teachers ask?
2. Which types of questions result in the longest student response?
3. Will there be any difference in the types of questions and responses according to the proficiency level of the class?

In addition, the following three research hypotheses, based on Brock (1986) will be tested:

1. Teachers will ask more display questions than referential questions.
2. Learner responses to referential questions will be longer and syntactically more complex than the response to display questions.
3. A greater number of referential questions will be accompanied by a greater number of confirmation checks and clarification requests by the teacher.

## Method

*Subjects*

The subjects for this study will be 43 adult students attending an in-company language training program at a major Japanese multinational company, for four hours a week. In terms of proficiency as measured by TOEIC scores the higher class has an average score of 711 and the lower level class has an average TOEIC score of 424. All the students have had at least five years of learning English either at school, university, or in company classes. Also serving as subjects for the study are two teachers, both female and British. Both teachers, have the RSA Certificate in TEFL and one teacher also has the RSA Diploma and a Postgraduate Diploma in EFL and is presently writing a thesis to complete her master's. The other teacher is in the process of earning the RSA Diploma in EFL. The teachers were selected on the basis of similar sex, nationality, and teaching experience. They also had access to classes at comparative levels and could teach the same lesson material to their classes. The students will be grouped in their already existing classes and taught by their normally scheduled teacher.

*Design*

This is intended to be descriptive research and will use naturally existing classes for the purpose of data collection. It will be a one-shot design in that each class will be observed only once.

*Data Collection*

Audio recordings of one hour duration will be made from four classes in total: two from a low proficiency class and two from a high proficiency class. Both teachers will teach one low proficiency class and high proficiency class. The teachers will use the same material for classes of a similar level. The higher level class will use an authentic, unsimplified article on illegitimacy taken from the British newspaper, *The Daily Telegraph*. The material used for the lower proficiency classes will be Unit 11 of *Coast to*



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*Coast* (Harmer, 1987), a general English textbook. The teachers will be provided with a small professional tape recorder to place on the table. These recordings will be transcribed and coded for the frequency of question types.

*Analysis*

Taxonomy for the form of teachers' questions:

Wh-questions, Yes/No questions, Alternative questions, Rhetorical Function taxonomy (modified version of Long and Sato, 1983).
Display questions—form-focused/content focused/repetitions.
Referential questions—open/closed/repetitions.
Rhetorical/expressive/repetitions.
Comprehension checks, confirmation checks, clarification requests.

The number of turns per student and teacher and mean number of words for student responses after given type of question will be calculated. Statistical analysis of frequencies obtained will involve 2-way Chi-square. To examine the discourse role of questions, the system shown in Wells (1979) will be used.

## Significance of study

To the best of our knowledge no study has been made using Wells's discourse role and Commodity network for an analysis of the exchange structure of classroom discourse in an adult EFL setting. The effect of different proficiency levels on teacher's questioning behavior has also not yet been researched. The proposed study outlined above is intended to contribute to a greater understanding of the role of teachers' questions and to provide more illustrative samples of actual classroom discourse. According to Long and Sato (1983), their results show that communicative use of the target language makes up only a minor part of typical classroom activities. Is the ESL classroom really so bereft of possibilities for genuine communication? It is the purpose of the study outlined in this proposal to investigate the truth of such an assertion.

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